

**through the middle of my soul by MissAtomicBomb
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Summary:

Nancy comes to school on Monday to find 'SLUT' scrawled across her locker in red paint.

It's nice to be back to normal, she thinks.

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Author's Note:

turns out these two still own my entire soul

Nancy comes to school on Monday to find '*SLUT*' scrawled across her locker in red paint.

It's nice to be back to normal, she thinks.

She gets most of it off before the first bell, but there's still the outline of the word stamped atop the metal. It doesn't matter the same way it did last fall. Nothing matters the same anymore. They can call her whatever they want, but she knows exactly what happened.

She gets some stares at lunch, eating alone in the corner of the cafeteria. A few of Steve's friends make fleeting eye contact, but not one comes over to talk to her.

Good. After the past week, she doesn't know if she could ever fake being a normal high schooler again.

Steve's gone for the first few days.

She heard from Mike, who heard from Dustin, that he had a concussion and had to spend a night at the hospital. He's probably still recovering from what Mike assures her was a *really* competitive fight.

Steve and Jonathan both disappearing only seems to spark more rumors. She can hear the whispers as she walks through the halls, Carol and her horrible gang of girls staring daggers into her back.

"Can you imagine being that desperate?"

"They probably went to some trashy motel-"

"Poor *Steve*."

"Bet Byers came after *him*, he's crazy-"

"*Total* psycho."

She can't do anything about it. It hardly matters that there are even bigger rumors circling their town, about the lab and the government and a cover up. She'll be last week's news soon enough, she can wait it out.

Friday morning Nancy rounds the corner towards her locker and finds someone already standing in front of it, scrubbing away what's left of the message.

She freezes. She'd been hoping and expecting it for days now, but to finally see Jonathan, same denim jacket and blue book bag, standing in front of her makes a shiver run down her spine.

He turns and he looks like he hasn't slept since they left his house. His hair is pushed away from his forehead, his grey shirt is wrinkled, and the paper towels in his hand are leaking on the floor.

"Oh." She says, because what else is there to say to a boy you shared a stranger's guest room with. A boy whose brother you stabbed with a fire iron.

Jonathan's locked his eyes on her, and his gaze makes her feel stronger, somehow.

Nancy gestures at her locker. "You don't have to."

"It's, uh, on mine too." He scratches at his neck. His fingertips are stained red, and she wonders how long it took to get off paint that's been there a week. She feels a flash of anger, protective instinct.

Nancy swallows.

"Pervert." He says quietly.

Of course.

"They're not very original." She supplies.

"No, they're not."

It's *awkward*. She hates it; it's never been like this with Jonathan. Weird and strange and exciting, but never awkward. She's never felt uncomfortable or on edge. But they've flipped the board and rewritten the rules to the game, and neither of them know where to go from here.

She's felt him whimper a cry into her shoulder, both of them slick with sweat, Will and the thing inside of him shrieking in the corner.

She's felt him whisper her name into her neck, the softest thing he's ever said, over and over before his eyes squeezed shut and he lost control.

She wants to reach out and take his hand, take him home where they can play hooky and spend all day in bed, laying next to each other, and maybe just feel safe for the first time in a long, long time.

The bell rings.

"I have Physics." Jonathan looks like he'd rather do anything else in the world than turn around and go find the Physics classroom.

"Right." She mumbles.

She should do something. She used to kiss Steve when they said goodbye before class, a peck on the lips or a press against his cheek. She considers it for a moment, but the fear of maybe scaring him off is too high.

Jonathan's still standing there, like he's waiting for something too. They've both been waiting so long, she thinks.

Nancy reaches for his hand. It's warm and calloused and still stained red. She squeezes, and he squeezes back, and it feels like more than

enough.

2:59. She sprints from her locker to the parking lot to get to his car before him, book bag slamming into her side. The brown paint of the car looks even shabbier than usual, and there's a suspicious dent in the front hood, but she parks herself beside the driver's door and waits.

Jonathan's coming up the row of cars, pulling out his keys when he sees her. A smile starts across his face, and the sight alone makes her forget the loneliness of the past week.

"Hey." He stops in front of her, hand still holding tight to his keys.

"Hey."

Jonathan shakes his head as the wind blows his hair in his face, and she wants terribly to kiss him.

"I missed you." He says. "I should have said earlier."

"Me too." Nancy presses her hands against the cool of the car. "To both."

He shuffles his feet, inching towards her.

"How's Will?"

"Fine, I guess." He moves closer, another foot erased in the gap between them. "He should be back at school soon."

Nancy nods.

Jonathan continues to slide closer, until he's boxing her against the car, and it feels safe and secure and *good*.

"I missed you." He says again, soft and low.

She wonders if he can hear how loud her heart is beating. She

wonders if his is doing the same.

"Nancy-"

She's the one who catches him this time, her mouth claiming his. He almost stumbles back, but she grips onto his shoulders and pulls him forward, into her, until they're leaning against the car and kissing in front of school at 3 in the afternoon.

This isn't going to help her reputation. She's sure she'll find another note scrawled onto her locker in the morning, calling her a cheating whore or a bitch or a liar. But that's nothing compared to the way it feels when Jonathan cups her face in his hands, or tugs on her hair. It's nothing at all, she thinks.

They keep it under wraps for half a week.

On Wednesday's they both have study hall last period, so they decide to leave early. Mom's taking Holly to her dance class and Dad's still at work, so there's no one to care that the first thing she does is straddle him on her floral comforter, run her hands through his hair and kiss him as hard as she can.

She loses track of the time as she peels off his shirt and pulls him on top of her. Her bed is creaking and she's thanking God for Dad's late work hours, and feeling more like a teenager than she has in the past few months.

Jonathan's got a hand creeping up the back of her shirt, and she's pressed against as much of him as she can, and suddenly-

The door opens. There's something like a sharp breath and a gasp, and then a little groan, and then it closes again.

Nancy can hear two little voices whispering harshly as she and Jonathan try to collect themselves, pretend they aren't breathing heavy and flushed all over.

"Nobody here knocks?" Jonathan questions, and she wants to forget all about Mike and his friends and get back to kissing him.

The door opens and it's, unsurprisingly, her brother and Lucas outside, pretending to be very interested in the pictures on the wall and not at all in her.

"Mike," she starts. "What do you want?"

"Oh, Nancy! Hey!" It's Lucas who answers, stammering and red faced. "How-how are you? How's- we were just- we needed- how's-"

"Can we borrow some clothes? We're gonna take them out to El tomorrow." Mike's pointedly staring over her shoulder, as if he's daring Jonathan to show his face.

Nancy crosses her arms.

"Sure. I'll bring you some later."

"We can't get them now?" Mike's standing his ground, despite Lucas' widening eyes.

"I'm busy." Nancy tells him, and there's a loud thump inside the room.

Mike raises an eyebrow.

"Busy?" He says, like the annoying, asshole little brother he likes to pretend to be.

"Yes. Busy." She wedges herself in the doorway so he can stop trying to peer around her. "I'll drop them in your room."

Lucas is already halfway down the stairs, still mumbling to himself, but Mike lingers another moment. He gives her a look, hard and.... *angry*, almost, before he follows after his friend.

"So, can I tell Will you're nailing his brother?"

Sunday afternoon. Mike's helping her rake leaves in the backyard, Holly's only a few feet away, and her mother is just inside the door. If she heard any of that, she would *definitely* revoke last night's invitation that Jonathan's welcome to stay for dinner whenever he'd like.

"Shut up!" She hisses, but Mike is undeterred.

"I already know you did it, you don't have to lie."

"I'm not *lying*, I just don't wanna talk about it with *my* little brother."

Mike shrugs.

"I'm not a little kid. I don't care." He pauses to wipe at his forehead and lean on the rake. "It's just weird cause it's *Jonathan*."

Nancy pauses.

"Why's that weird?"

"I don't think he's ever even *talked* to a girl before you."

She rolls her eyes.

"And because of Steve-"

"Oh, don't tell me *you're* Steve's best friend now too." She's not sure what happened, but it's suddenly like all the boys *love* Steve. He gives them rides to the movies and the mall and she *swears* Dustin's even wearing his cologne.

Mike looks away.

"No, but it was wrong."

She watches Holly sit herself on the steps of the back porch, oblivious to anything and everything that's happening between her siblings.

"It wasn't." Nancy says, but her voice has gotten soft.

Mike sighs loudly.

"Cheating is wrong-"

"I didn't *cheat* on him." She wants to be angry, but she only feels the same as when Carol hissed the same word at her in the middle of art class. Empty and misunderstood. But she doesn't know where Mike would have gotten that from; even Steve wouldn't phrase it like that, no matter how upset he was.

Mike almost laughs at her.

"What would *you* call it?" He shoves the points of the rake into the dirt. "Sleeping with somebody you're not dating-"

"Steve and I were done a long time ago." That's a lazy answer. It's true, too.

"Then you should have-"

"I *know*." She does, thinks about it every time he passes in the hall or gives her a wave in class. "I know I should have been better."

Mike's still looking away from her, his head craned down and his hair covering his eyes.

"But that doesn't.... *love* isn't wrong." She sounds like a soap opera or an after school special, but she doesn't know any other way to tell him. Maybe one day he'll feel it too, the way it is to need someone in every possible way, so much it's about to make you split open just because of it.

Mike thinks on that one for a second. He returns to raking slowly, silently. Once they have three neat piles in the yard, he sets the rake against the side of the porch and wraps both arms around her middle.

He's as tall as she is now, and it feels less like hugging her little, obnoxious, nerdy brother, and more like hugging an equal.

"Nancy, sweetheart," Mrs. Byers always says that, as if it's her full

name, like *Nancy-sweetheart* is one word and it's the only applicable thing to call her. "You know you're welcome to spend the night."

She feels a sudden tension fall over the table, from Will at the head to Hopper on her left, shoving his fork into a piece of broccoli with all the concentration in the world.

Jonathan lays a hand on her knee.

"Oh, well, I'd have to call my parents-"

"I'd be happy to explain." Mrs. Byers spoons more potatoes onto her plate like nothing at all is amiss. "That you were working on a project, and just had to crash here."

Jonathan's thoughtfully chewing beside her, but he doesn't make a noise.

Nothing sounds better than being able to spend the night beside Jonathan without sneaking him in and out of her window, without feeling Mike's knowing smirk at the breakfast table in the morning.

Something kicks her under the table, and she realizes it's Will, aiming for his brother with a shit-eating grin of his own.

"Okay." She says, and Mrs. Byers beams at her.

"Great! How about ice cream for dessert?"

That night, once the house is quiet and Jonathan's arms are tight around her, his mouth softly kissing her neck, Nancy has a thought.

"Does your mom... What does she think we're doing in here?"

Jonathan stills for a moment, before he lets out a little laugh, his breath hot against her.

"Having sex."

She can't believe he's so blunt about it, that *Mrs. Byers* would ever be so blunt about it.

"You *told* her?"

Jonathan nuzzles his head into her neck.

"She has eyes." He says, and he nips at her skin. "We're not really subtle, you know."

Oh, she knows.

She tries not to compare them, but she's only had two sexual partners in her life.

Steve was so sure of himself. He knew what he liked and he knew what he wanted and he knew how to get them both off.

Jonathan likes to explore. It might take an hour instead of twenty minutes, but he usually finds what he's looking for. He might be inexperienced but he more than makes up for it with enthusiasm.

The first time she takes him in her mouth he almost loses it. His hand comes up to her head and a strangled sound leaves his mouth, something like *oh, Jesus, Nancy, please*.

Please. He says that a lot. *Please, god, touch me. Please, god, let me touch you*.

Nancy doesn't know if she's ever felt more powerful than she does when Jonathan's teetering on the edge, reaching out for her like she's all that's left. Not shooting a gun, not facing down a monster.

She comes to visit him at work one day, and Jonathan introduces her to a coworker as his girlfriend.

"This is my girlfriend, Nancy."

My girlfriend. Not my monster-hunting partner. Not the girl who

helped save my brother's life. Not the girl I took on a road trip to Indianapolis to meet some hack conspiracy theorist and take down a government institution.

He's right, of course, but they've never really talked about it. They've never needed to lay down labels or ground rules. They've always just known that whatever this was, it was good it was happening. It was *right*.

Jonathan lays her down in the backseat of his car, head already halfway between her thighs.

She watches the fog collect on the backseat window, feels Jonathan lace his fingers with hers. Her stomach feels full and her heart feels big and there's the lovely drop building in her gut, climbing like a roller coaster.

He comes up for air, face slick and eyes pitch dark.

She certain that she's never seen anything more beautiful.

He smiles. He smiles so much now, at school, or at dinner with his family, driving in the car, or at the movies. Sifting through the monster hunting supplies or cooking dinner for her and Will.

He's happy, and something inside of Nancy feels pristine in knowing she is part of the reason why.

Jonathan wipes at his mouth.

"Nance," he says, and she's never liked nicknames but it feels natural dropping from his mouth. "I want to... can I tell you something?"

Nancy nods. She very much hopes that something is "I wanna go down on you for the next hour, or maybe until my mom sends Hopper out looking for us."

"I love you." He says instead.

He's just had his head at her center for ten minutes, she's got arousal pumping a steady rhythm through her body, but suddenly her heart seems to stall the roller coaster.

A different moment pops into her head, of wearing a varsity jacket and feeling the urge to repeat those same words back, as if she doesn't say them now she'll lose that girl forever. The one who worried about school exams instead of fighting monsters. The one who stayed up late talking to her best friend instead of writing letters to the news.

But there's no push in her chest this time, no adrenaline that spikes down her spine. There's only a warmth in her whole body and the smell of something sweet, and a little musky and entirely Jonathan.

"I love you, too."

He kisses her, deep and long and in a way that makes it feels as if she's about to crack open under the weight of how much it feels. How much he makes her feel.

There are a lot of things *boyfriend* doesn't cover. It doesn't touch on slicing themselves open together. It doesn't begin to explain the knowledge of what it is to come face to face with another universe. It can't answer why they both wake up in the middle of the night, cold and terrified and lost.

It doesn't account for everything they've already done for each other. It couldn't ever encompass the knowledge that if this all happens again, they would be side by side once more.

It does make her smile when she says it, and that's gotta count for something. Almost everything, in fact.